

Small Business Person of the Year

Kelly Mendell: Leading the way for RI Small Business

Kelly Mendell is the president and majority owner of MIKEL, a woman-owned, leading undersea warfare technology company in Middletown. In 1999, Kelly's father, Brian Guimond, started MIKEL, in 2002 Kelly joined him and by 2008 was the company's President.

Kelly's journey began at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, where she majored in engineering and began interning in a machine shop gaining hands-on experience in manufacturing, planning, materials, and quality control. Kelly graduated from UMASS with her BS in Industrial Engineering and from Babson College with an MBA and would go to work for companies including Polaroid, Gillette, and Raytheon working as both an industrial engineer and manufacturing manager.

In 2002, after the birth of her daughter Laura, Kelly joined MIKEL as the Managing Director. Kelly was responsible for managing all aspects of the business including billing, payroll, contracts, accounting, benefits, financial tracking, sales, and marketing. A few years later, after her second child, Max was born, the work-life balance became even more demanding and included many trips and long evenings of work after her children went to bed. Mendell persevered, making strategic personnel decisions during a time of economic downturn and was moved into the role of President.

Kelly reflected on the difficult decisions she had to make in 2008, "We had to do layoffs and that's what really motivated me to grow because we have a family atmosphere here and I feel a sense of obligation to these people I'm hiring." She continued, "I want to make sure they have jobs for a long time that are challenging, interesting, and good paying. It's not pleasant to lay off people that you care for and are good workers, so I decided that I didn't want to ever be in that situation again."

To ensure her company's future would be stable Mendell reached out to SBA resource partners, SCORE and The Center for Women & Enterprise. She began working with SCORE on how to win government contracts while using her CWE counseling to focus on presentation, speaking, marketing, documentation, and professionalism.

These essential educational and personnel decisions allowed MIKEL to garner crucial government contracts that would keep them in the black from 2008 through today. "I was really motivated to grow," said Mendell, "I wanted our company to rise and I wanted to bring stability to our business at a time when defense was not stable and we had a lot of uncertainty with our programs," she added. Due to Kelly's leadership MIKEL was able to stay successful during one of the most difficult economic periods in national history and by the time 2015 had come MIKEL had grown to 110 employees.

Today the company employs over 175 engineers, logisticians, technicians and developers and hopes to continue to provide even more challenging jobs in the future. "The key to growth is to do a really great job on your current work." In conjunction with this philosophy, MIKEL is on the lookout to

work in other high growth areas in the DoD like the unmanned domain and cyber security because companies have to keep up with the market demands to stay alive and viable.

In Kelly's spare time she holds a leadership role on the executive board for SENEDIA, which promotes the defense business in Southeast New England, STEM in schools, and increases the visibility and education for those in the defense sector. Kelly has also sat on panels for the National Conference on Women-Owned Businesses discussing her Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) success story, and Small Businesses Association of New England (SBANE).

For her demonstrated success and potential for future growth, the U.S. Small Business Administration is pleased to honor Kelly B. Mendell, President of MIKEL, as the 2018 Rhode Island Small Business Person of the Year.